

MICHIGAN PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA

My name is Michael Harris, Executive Director for the Michigan Paralyzed Veterans of America (MPVA). I am accompanied by Rick Briggs, Veterans Advocate serving those with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).

Upon becoming Executive Director of MPVA, I made a decision to be committed to serving our members health care needs. For the Paralyzed Veterans of America, overcoming obstacles and challenges is nothing new – it is a fact of life all of our members live with on a daily basis.

Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) was founded in 1946 by a small group of returning World War II veterans, all of whom had experienced catastrophic spinal cord injury and who were consigned to various military hospitals throughout the country. Realizing that neither the medical profession, nor government, had ever confronted the needs of such a population, the returning veterans decided to become their own advocates and to do so through a national organization.

From the outset, the founders recognized that other elements of society were neither willing, nor prepared, to address the full range of challenges facing individuals with a spinal cord injury; be they medical, social, or economic. Paralyzed Veterans' founders were determined to create an organization that would be governed by the members, themselves, and address their own unique needs.

Being told that their life expectancy could be measured in weeks or months, these individuals set forth to make their primary goal actions that would maximize the quality of life and opportunity for all veterans and individuals with spinal cord injury, and it remains so today.

To achieve its goal over the years, Paralyzed Veterans has established ongoing programs of research, sports, service representation to secure our members and other veterans' benefits, advocacy in promoting the rights of all citizens with disabilities, architecture promoting accessibility, and communications to educate the public about individuals with spinal cord injury.

Today, Paralyzed Veterans is the only congressionally chartered veterans' service organization dedicated solely to the benefit and representation of veterans with spinal cord injury or disease. There are 34 chapters across the country representing nearly 20,000 veterans.

Michigan's paralyzed veterans quickly learned that a spinal cord injury presented very new medical, physical and social challenges. They realized that successful rehabilitation required facing a hostile physical environment outside the hospital. A wheelchair was not a welcome piece of equipment in the communities that they lived in.

Even if they found a way to drive a car, there were very few places they could go; the soldier who returned from battle in hopes of seeing his beloved Detroit Tigers had nowhere to sit in the stadium; the soldier who returned to Grand Rapids could not be accommodated in stores, restaurants, or movie theaters.

The MPVA grew from the need to overcome these challenges. Since 1946, our mission has been, and remains, a huge part of the Michigan community as the MPVA has advocated for our members and all veterans with SCI or related diseases. Through our leadership, Michigan's paralyzed veterans are supported in receiving the benefits that a grateful nation intended for them to have. PVA follows through in recognizing the dedicated service paralyzed veterans gave to our state, and our nation.

We do that in a variety of ways. PVA national service officers are guides and companions who help paralyzed veterans – as well as their dependents, survivors, and other veterans - obtain their benefits. Thanks to PVA, our members learn about changes at the Congressional level, or through VA rules, that may enhance the quality of life provided by their medical benefits.

Our service officers visit hospitalized veterans and provide oversight of VA medical centers, directly monitoring the delivery of health care by visiting VA hospitals throughout Michigan. Because Michigan veterans with SCI or disease receive care at VA medical centers without a spinal cord injury unit, PVA staff also visits and monitors these centers. We are able to provide national and regional data that would otherwise be unavailable to government or to the medical profession.

Anyone dealing with practical, day-to-day, issues related to VA health care services knows how complex issues such as admissions, transfers, prosthetics, medicines and supplies, staffing, accessibility, and discharge planning can be. Our PVA service officers provide a voice and act as advocates for veterans and their families as they move toward recovery and successful independent living.

PVA service officers are an excellent resource for the paralyzed veterans thanks to continuous, year-round training. In addition to education and training at the local and regional level, PVA service officers are required to attend an annual week of continuing education classes in Washington D.C. administered by our national offices trained facilitators.

It has been a long standing PVA written policy that our National Service Department ensures that all Service Officers submit well-grounded fully developed claims on behalf of veterans wherever we might represent them. We emphasize the importance of guiding veterans through the matrix of information and towards gathering the proper evidence to ensure the claims submitted are as complete as possible.

We are careful not to build unrealistic expectations for the veterans we serve. We are sensitive to the need to prevent claims backlog that occurs when claims are incomplete or frivolous. PVA is part of the solution in processing accurate and complete veterans'

claims in a timely manner. This diligence has significantly benefited the veterans whom we serve. The feedback we receive from our members is consistently positive with respect to the completeness of our claims work. Veterans are pleased that once their claims are filed they have no further action other than to wait for their rating results.

We also make a priority of opening offices where veterans can easily reach us. Our current resources allow us to provide full-time services at the McNamara Federal Building in Detroit and at our Novi headquarters. We offer part-time services at the VA Medical Center in Detroit, Ann Arbor and Battle Creek. We make periodic visits to the VA Medical Center in Saginaw, to the Detroit Rehabilitation Institute of Michigan, and to the University of Michigan Medical Center spinal cord injury unit.

As a result of our efforts in Fiscal Year 2013/14, we have interviewed almost 2,000 veterans and their dependents, obtaining millions in new or increased VA benefits spent here in Michigan to improve the lives of our members.

Since our founding, generation after generation of veterans, have looked to PVA as a significant resource in achieving the highest quality of life and independence. Our efforts address the long-term health-care requirements of aging veterans, as well as providing outreach and assistance today to newly injured service members returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Thanks to progressive legislation regarding civil rights and access to public places, our veterans will face fewer physical obstacles during their recovery. But you know, and we know, that a paralyzed veteran have a greater challenge ahead for the rest of his or her life than how to negotiate a sidewalk.

That is why we are here. That's why our members, and our associate members, support us. We are uniquely qualified to undertake a broad range of activities to ensure that veterans from every era who experience spinal cord injury or dysfunction receive the highest quality of medical care and benefits they have so honorably earned.

The price for those benefits has already been paid.

The MPVA is fully committed to working with the other veteran service organizations and with the Department of Military & Veterans Affairs to ensure that we achieve the ultimate goal of better serving Michigan veterans and their families.

MPVA Programs Overview:

The Michigan PVA, along with the other 34 chapters across the country, has become major voices within the veteran's community and have helped to meet the needs of millions of Americans with disabilities (veterans and non-veterans).

PVA is committed to assisting and supporting individuals with disabilities through the following programs:

- *Veterans Benefits Counseling*
- *Advocacy/Government Relations*
- *Spinal Cord Injury Research*
- *Wheelchair Loan Closet*
- *Educational Information on Spinal Cord Injuries*
- *Wheelchair Sports*
- *Disability Civil Rights*
 - *Employment,*
 - *Housing,*
 - *Transportation*
 - *Public Accommodation*
 - *Public Services*
- *Health Care/Rehabilitation*

MPVA Government Relations & Advocacy Program

Through our Government Relations & Advocacy program, The Michigan Paralyzed Veterans of America (MPVA) works closely with federal, state, local policymakers to initiate and implement legislation that provides veterans, their dependents and survivors with necessary benefits and services. By initiating legal action when necessary and acting as an information resource, MPVA advances and protects the civil rights of its members and all people living with SCI/D.

The MPVA is an activist organization that fulfills its mission on behalf of our state's paralyzed veterans, and all residents with physical disabilities.

Among our recent accomplishments:

- We participated with the office of the Secretary of State in selecting the first-ever voting machine for disabled voters;
- We participated in the federal HAVA (Help Americans Vote Act) by inspecting polling places for accessibility throughout southeastern Michigan.
- Assisted the Detroit Riverwalk Conservancy by reviewing architectural drawings to ensure that the Riverwalk is in compliance with federal accessibility guidelines

- Provided technical support for Wayne State University to ensure capital improvements to their campus are done so in compliance with federal/state accessibility guidelines
- Assisted the architects during the design phase of Comerica Ballpark and Ford Field to make sure that the stadiums were designed/built in compliance with State/Federal barrier free design guidelines.
- Assisted the architects during the design phase of the new Detroit Red Wings Arena to ensure that the facility were designed/built in compliance with State/Federal barrier free design guidelines.
- Assisted the architects during the renovation of Cobo Center to ensure that the upgrades to the facility were in compliance with State/Federal barrier free design guidelines.
- Continually inform and educate the public in regards to disability rights laws, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and state and local building codes.
- Played a role in the passage of the following legislation:
 1. The Michigan Freedom to Work for Individuals with Disabilities Act: removes many of the once significant barriers that kept many individuals with disabilities from becoming members of the workforce by ensuring that they will be able to work more, earn more and save more without losing their Medicaid benefits.
 2. The Home Inclusive Home Design Act: incorporates basic accessibility improvements into the new construction of single-family homes built with state funding.
 3. Public Act 248 & 249 of 2005: MPVA, along with the other Veteran Services Organizations, were instrumental in ensuring that the Michigan Veterans Trust Fund was use as originally intended – to provide emergency grants for veterans – and solve the funding crisis of the state’s Tuition Grant Program by moving it from the Michigan Veterans Trust Fund to the Michigan Higher Education Authority, and establishing a tax check-off donation box on the state’s income tax form beginning January 2006.
- Getting Michigan Department of Transportation to make the state accessibility codes for “public rights-of-ways” uniform with the federal codes.
- Created and sustained www.ThePumpGuide.com” which is an online guide of gas stations statewide that offer disabled travelers full service at self-service prices.
- Successful conclusion to the complaint MPVA filed with the Federal Transit Administration alleging discrimination by the Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) under the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- Successful conclusion on numerous civil rights complaints in federal court against municipalities throughout southeastern Michigan for violating Title II of ADA
- Successful conclusion on our lawsuit against the University of Michigan ensuring that Michigan Stadium was in compliance with federal accessibility guidelines
- Was able to get Marathon Gas Stations throughout Michigan to install the fuel call button that allows people with disabilities to communicate with gas station attendants that they need refueling assistance.

- Continued to monitor the Michigan Department of Transportation to ensure that they are properly installing “public-right-of-ways under Michigan accessibility guidelines.
- In conjunction with the Detroit Chapter of the American Institute of Architects presented an Architectural Accessibility Seminar for architects from southeastern Michigan.

MPVA Sports & Recreation Program

Before World War II, if you suffered a spinal cord injury, you normally died within 18 months of the time the injury occurred. As a result of medical advances made during and after the War, paralyzed veterans and other Americans with a spinal cord injury can now expect to live full and productive lives.

Paralyzed Veterans of America has always believed that recreation, leisure and play improve quality of life as well as “improve and maintain physical and psychological health and well-being.”

When people with disabilities stay physically fit, they gain the same health benefits enjoyed by others and at the same time reduce the risk of developing additional health problems.

Wellness and recreation activities are social occasions at which people enjoy themselves and make new friends. When people of different abilities and backgrounds come together, they can develop positive perceptions, break down barriers, and banish stereotypes.

Accordingly, the mission of our Sports & Recreation program is to improve the quality of life of paralyzed veterans and other people with disabilities by expanding the rich experience and array of opportunities in sports and recreation, especially those non competitive activities that enhance lifetime health and fitness.

To further this mission, MPVA has increase over the years the number of sports and recreation event that we sponsor. For example, we are the major sponsor for the Detroit Free Press Marathon Wheelchair Division.

MPVA Research & Education

More than 750,000 people in the United States, including veterans, live with a spinal cord injury and/or a spinal cord disease. Paralyzed Veterans of America responds to their needs by supporting research, and educational programs and other initiatives that unite people and activities toward a single mission: improved quality of life.

MPVA Serves On The Following Boards:

University of Michigan Spinal Cord Injury Advisory Board:

Member of board consisting of individuals with expertise in spinal cord injury research, medicine, managed care, and personal experiences with spinal cord injury. Role of the board is to guide the University of Michigan in their efforts to provide service and conducting research designed to improve the quality of life for people with spinal cord injury.

Rehabilitation of Institute of Michigan Spinal Cord Injury Advisory Board:

Member of board consisting of individuals with expertise in spinal cord injury research, medicine, managed care, and personal experiences with spinal cord injury. Role of the board is to guide RIM in their efforts to provide service and conducting research designed to improve the quality of life for people with spinal cord injury.

Delta Airline Customers Advisory Board on Disabilities:

Serve on the Delta Customer Advisory Board on Disabilities where we meet quarterly to give advice and recommendations on how the airline can better serve and communicate with the growing travel segment of air travelers with disabilities.

Ray West Project Ramp Advisory Board - United Way for Southeastern Michigan:

Project Ramp builds wheelchair ramps for adults and children with physical disabilities, living at or below poverty level. Since the program's inception, more than 250 ramps have been built throughout Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb counties. These ramps greatly increase the recipient's quality of life as they allow individuals to maintain an independent lifestyle and have access to their communities.

Michigan Department of Natural Resources Disability Advisory Council:

The role of the Board is to advise the DNR on policy issues related to accessibility and to assist their efforts of implementing the agency's strategic plan for accessible recreation.

The Senior Alliance (TSA) Board of Directors:

The Senior Alliance works to enable older persons to function as independently as possible in the community environment which best suits their needs. To provide the advocacy, programming, planning, contracting, funding, and personnel necessary to accomplish the foregoing purpose throughout Southern and Western Wayne County.

Wayne State University Disability Advisory Board

The role of the Board is to ensure that new construction/renovations projects throughout the campus is done so in compliance with federal/state accessibility guidelines so students with disabilities can have an enjoyable college experience

Michigan Barrier Free Design Board

The board has the responsibility to receive, review, and process requests for exceptions to the barrier free design guidelines.

MPVA/RIM Peer Mentoring Program

MPVA in collaboration with DMC Rehabilitation Institute of Michigan provides a peer mentoring program which strives to offer increased independence, encouragement and empowerment to individuals who are recovering or living with a disability.

MPVA Directory

Our Chapter Office is located at:

40550 Grand River Avenue

Novi, Michigan, 48375

Office hours: 8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

Phone: 1-800-638-MPVA (6782)

Phone: 1-248-476-9000

Fax: 1-248-476-9545

Staff:

Michael F Harris - Executive Director

- Email Address: mharris@michiganpva.org

Jaclyn Kochis - Deputy Executive Director/Development/PR

- Email Address: jkochis@michiganpva.org

Brenda Wheater - Administrative Assistant

- Email Address: chapterhq@michiganpva.org

Rick Briggs - Veterans Advocate

- Email Address: rvbriggsjr@yahoo.com

Bonnie Williams - Veterans Benefits Service Officer

- Email Address: bwilliams@michiganpva.org

Scott Severn - Sports Director

- Email Address: ssevern@michiganpva.org

Willie DeBerry - Office Maintenance

- Email Address - None

Linda Highland - Finance Director

- Email Address: None

Our Service Office is located at:

McNamara Federal Building

477 Michigan Avenue, Room 1233

Detroit, MI 48226

Office Hours: 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. Phone: 313-471-3996

Michigan Toll-free: 1-800-795-3608

Staff:

Stephanie Strickland - Service Officer

- Email Address: StephanieS@pva.org

Marilyn Kittrell - Administrative Assistant

- Email Address: None